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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the principal of a high school in Eugene, Oregon, describes the impact of the adoption of collaborative decisionmaking procedures in his school. The collaborative decisionmaking experiment began in 1970 with an organization development (OD) intervention intended to train the school faculty in communication skills, group processes, problemsolving, and decisionmaking. The author served as the intervener for the project while pursuing graduate studies at the University of Oregon. The author describes the collaborative decisionmaking structure developed at the school as a result of the OD intervention and discusses some of the advantages and disadvantages of the new arrangement. Results of a 1974 staff survey showing showing widespread understanding and support of the collaborative structure are contrasted with the results of a similar survey from 1970, before the OD intervention. In a brief addendum, the author summarizes significant developments at the school during the first half of the 1974-75 school year and discusses the addition of student representatives to two of the school's decisionmaking bodies. (JG)

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6.13 Organizational Development in Schools - Some Examples

COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: Difficult but worth the price (with addendum)

A paper delivered to American Educational Research Association
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COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: Difficult but worth the price

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INTRODUCTION

Schools are essentially human systems; their products are human. Yet, rather consistently, they have looked to the business world for management models--models that have been designed primarily to promote efficiency and to insure a profit from the sale of material goods. Granted there is much to be learned from business organizations. Schools must operate with limited financial resources; they must use money efficiently. They must have the necessary buildings, equipment, and supplies. But the primary expense in any school budget is the teaching and management personnel. Historically, these resources, though recognized as being paramount, have not been managed with the same understanding, skill, and care devoted to the material resources.

I am not attempting to indict school managers nor their teachers. However, much useful knowledge, available today, is not finding its way into the training of school administrators. It is true that many schools are trying some new things under such labels as accountability, management by objectives, and career education, for example. Unfortunately, too many innovations turn out to be wild goose chases bringing us back near the place where we started. Nothing much has changed.

The Kettering Report [3, p.7] shares with us the impact of the experimentation of the 1960's and points out that analysts from the Ford Foundation, a foundation which invested 30 million dollars in school innovations in the last decade, did so without any lasting or significant results. "Money alone," they wrote, "seemed not to be decisive in innovative improvement. Most innovations were abandoned after the departure of the charismatic promoter and with the reduction of external funding."

There are no ready answers for the big questions facing educational managers. Many limiting conditions are imposed from outside, such as the throes of social and economic change that none of us yet can comprehend. Nevertheless, something can be done to improve

the management of the human resources in our schools. Probably no more significant step than this can be taken.

Maslow [4, p. 46] contends that man's motives fall into classes which are arranged in a hierarchy at the top of which are self-actualization needs. He asserts that even the lowliest untalented man seeks self-actualization, a sense of meaning and accomplishment in his work, if his other needs are more or less fulfilled. Self-actualization, I believe, is the most relevant motivation for managers, professional employees, and other educated groups in our society. Herzberg, et al, [2] in their study of accountants and engineers have found supporting evidence for this contention.

Correspondingly, it seems likely that creating a climate in which teachers can function creatively and imaginatively in their teaching will insure some measure of fulfillment of their self-actualizing needs. Those who desire to move into quasi-administrative roles, such as department chairmen, can be provided some opportunities to use their talents in formulating and fostering the goals of the organization. Through their increased understanding of and commitment to these goals there is a greater chance that the goals will be disseminated and implemented.

Similarly, I contend that teachers today are better trained than previously and less willing merely to follow decisions handed down by administrators. More and more, they are demanding a greater voice in decisions that affect their welfare; they are organizing, in fact, to insure that their voices will be heard and their demands negotiated. Administrators can either look upon this movement as a threat, or they can attempt to minimize the hostility that comes about through antagonistic roles. A move toward more collaborative decision making and sharing of power voluntarily is one option that is well worth exploring.

AN EXPERIMENT IN COLLABORATIVE DECISION MAKING

At Sheldon High School in Eugene, Oregon, where I am principal, we have been experimenting now for four years with collaborative decision making. We started with an organizational development intervention. I stepped out of my role as principal for a year and served as the intervener while pursuing graduate studies at the University of Oregon. In

our initial effort, we gave the entire faculty of about 70 teachers training in communications skills, and then moved to training and practice in group process, problem solving, and decision making. We explored methods of involving the entire staff in shared decision making.

The experimentation with collaborative decision making by a staff of seventy proved to be extremely complicated and time-consuming. It frustrated many. One reason was that many faculty members found it very difficult to deal with the conflict that arose when they were attempting to communicate openly about differences in value systems.

There were both gains and losses in our efforts. Among the gains that were made were: (1) The staff did improve their communications during the intervention. There was more evidence of use of communications skills both formally and informally. (2) Staff members' views of who made decisions changed; teachers felt that they were more influential in decision making. (3) The staff learned a new method of solving problems, and it became an integral part of the operation of the school. (4) There was also a distinct shift in beliefs about the location of influence among staff members; more staff members were believed to be influential than previously [1].

At the end of the year, I resumed my role as principal. Believing that many of the theoretical tenets that make up organizational development theory are sound, I continued to use them as a basis for further experimentation. Though involving the whole staff in extensive decision making seemed impractical, I was determined to find an effective compromise. My focus then became the development of leadership groups in whom I could invest power and responsibility for shared decision making.

In the past three years, our most substantial gains have been in our management team. My three assistant principals and I have reached a very close working relationship. We now all strive very hard to operate in an atmosphere of openness and trust. We realize the need for open communication; this means to us that we must be able to deal with one another's feelings as well as ideas. We use a problem-solving approach in working through complex problems before we make decisions; we make decisions by consensus. While we have

fixed responsibilities, each person is free to raise any issue as an agenda item for the administrative group to deal with, and we attempt not to make an unilateral decision about those things which have interdependent ramifications.

An even more significant achievement has been the development of a decison-making body which meets regularly and is composed of all department chairmen, two head teachers, one assistant principal, and myself. This body operates on a basis similar to that of the administrative team and deals with school-wide policy and curriculum decisions that concern more than one department. Any staff member or student in the school may initiate an agenda item for this body to consider and may come and speak to it. The role of convener changes each nine weeks, as does the role of recorder; thus everyone shares in the leadership. My voice counts only as a member of the group unless I clearly state in advance my position as principal--and I rarely do this. Decisions are almost always made by consensus.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

To illustrate the level of effectiveness of this group, for the past two years we have sat down, negotiated, and made group decisions about the allocation of the total capital outlay budget for the school. Though there were members who feared this procedure in the beginning--there was the risk that they wouldn't fare as well using this procedure--they all now feel hugely satisfied with the results. Each department now understands and supports the allocation for every other department, and there is no longer the selfishness and mistrust that were formerly present.

In January, 1974, this Decision-Making Body (known to faculty members as the DMB) surveyed opinion of the rest of the staff to determine the degree of acceptance of its efforts. Eighty-five percent of the staff stated that they felt they understood the function of the DMB. Fifty-nine percent indicated that they had attended a meeting of the DMB. Twenty-five percent said they had initiated agenda items for consideration, and seventy-eight percent said they understood the process for initiating an agenda item. Eighty-eight percent stated that they read the minutes and followed agendas of the group. Eighty-three percent said they could obtain satisfactory and adequate information about school-wide issues from

their department chairman or head teacher. Seventy-six percent stated that they had confidence that their department chairman or head teacher could represent their interests effectively on most issues. Ninety-two percent said they believed that a process now exists for important issues to be raised by staff members who have concerns. Eighty-one percent of the staff approved a continuation of this group in its present role.[1]

When one examines these data against those collected in 1970--four years earlier--which indicated: (1) that too few teachers had been involved or felt influential in decision making, (2) that the principal made too many decisions, and (3) that the organization was overstructured, one can only conclude that real gains have been made. With 88% indicating that they read the minutes and follow the agendas of the DMB and with 83% indicating that they can obtain satisfactory and adequate information about school-wide issues from their department chairman or head teacher, poor communication described in the 1970 interviews must be considered significantly improved. The strong approval by staff members for continuation of the DMB in its present function indicates a high degree of satisfaction with its decision making.

The most recent data I have which would reveal psychological and organizational growth among members of the DMB were collected near the end of April, 1973, at the time the group had been in operation nearly one school year. It showed increased recognition of interdependence among members of the group and increased confidence on the part of members in their ability to deal with significant problems. There was a large gain in individual commitment to decisions made by the group, in understanding of school-wide issues, and in the ability to communicate these school-wide issues to teachers. I was viewed by the group as gaining in my ability to be open with the group and in my avoidance of imposing power when the group was engaged in problem solving.

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[1]All percentages reported include opinions of staff members other than those who compose the DMB. Only one teacher failed to participate in the survey.

The data collected from DMB members were obtained by questionnaire. I asked each member, in retrospect, to make comparisons between the beginning efforts of the DMB and those of nearly a year later. Obviously, there are serious weaknesses in such a procedure. However, the uniformity of the favorable changes and their magnitude leave the best interpretation of the data to be that some strong changes did take place.

Though one must be cautious in his interpretation of the data (I must also question my own objectivity), my conclusions are that we have made many significant gains. At the same time, new problems have emerged. As it has become legitimate to surface conflict and to deal with it, we have found more conflict to deal with. Increased time also has had to be devoted to group decision making. I have had to make significant changes in my behavior as an administrator. I had to learn to share power and to feel comfortable in doing so. I had to place trust in others not to misuse their new power, and I had to gain confidence in the decisions the group made. I found that members of the group often possessed vital information necessary for intelligent problem solving and decision making. The payoff has been in the clarity of understanding that people have had of the decisions that have been made and in their ability and willingness to cooperate in implementing those decisions.

Our goal at Sheldon High School has been to work toward increased understanding and improved implementation of decisions that are made. The data show that increased understanding has occurred. My subjective judgment is that there is less tension and less overt opposition to decisions that are made, and there is improvement in implementing decisions--one recent example is a change that was made in school attendance policies at the beginning of the 1973-74 school year.[2]

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[2]A number of department chairmen entered the discussion of the problem considering it to be a problem belonging to the administration. By the time the problem had been defined and a solution determined, department chairmen showed marked commitment to the decision and aided its implementation in their departments.

Schein contends that man seeks to be mature on the job and wants autonomy and independence to some degree. He also believes that man is primarily self-motivated and controlled and that there is no inherent conflict between self-actualization and more effective organizational performance [5, p. 57]. I share these beliefs, and it has been my goal to provide for these self-actualizing needs--at least among department chairmen and administrators, and where possible among other faculty members. To the degree that we succeed, teachers and administrators will feel better about their roles, be less frustrated, and be more productive.

I wish I had time to tell you more about the sort of training that was necessary to bring about these new norms. I wish I had time, too, to tell you some of the things that went wrong and some of the things I would now do differently. I shall be glad to answer questions about these matters. The thought I wish to leave with you is that there are important things we can do inside our own organizations to improve their functioning, despite severe environmental limitations, and the key to some of these important things is the use of methods of organizational development to draw out the human resources that lie unused around us.

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ADDENDUM
February 1975

Since change and growth are continuous, it is necessary to add to the paper I prepared roughly six months ago to show some recent rather significant trends.

In the fall of 1974, representatives of the student government petitioned the DMB to add a student member to the body. After considerable debate and after sampling staff opinion, the DMB decided by consensus to add the student member for a year and then evaluate the effects of the decision. The students very carefully selected their representative and he is functioning well at the present time. The addition of the student viewpoint has been very beneficial at times and we now have other students sitting in on meetings which seldom happened before. The student member has the same rights and privileges as any other member of the DMB.

As the current school year has unfolded, it has become increasingly obvious to many of us at Sheldon High School that the DMB is incapable of providing all of the necessary leadership in curriculum development in the school. Several reasons for this are: (1) DMB members have many responsibilities which divide their interests and prevent them from focusing primarily on curricular issues. (2) The state has mandated new graduation requirements; the school district has developed a very comprehensive three-pronged plan which must be implemented for sophomores during 1975-76. This has increased time pressures tremendously. (3) There is a desire on the part of a number of staff members to break out of the rigid departmental structure which now determines, in a large part, many curriculum decisions. (4) The superintendent (new about a year and one-half ago) is making decisions which impose new outside variables on curriculum issues. (5) The impact of the new school district administrative reorganization under the new superintendent is now beginning to be recognized. Curriculum coordinators of various disciplines who formerly served the whole school district have been replaced by a curriculum generalist in each high school attendance area. (6) Some staff members outside of the DMB have begun to express the desire to have a greater voice in influencing decisions which affect the school.

In December, 1974, in response to the growing feeling on the part of some staff members that they would like to play a greater role in affecting some of the decisions made in the school, a proposal was made to form a staff council of 15 members to deal with problems outside of the realm of those normally dealt with by the DMB. Part of this feeling appeared to generate from the recognition of the time pressures being experienced by the DMB and the fact that the DMB was not able to deal effectively with all problems perceived by staff members. The proposal to form the staff council went to the faculty as a whole, and after considerable discussion the proposal was passed. The process used was one adopted by the faculty as an alternative decision-making process at the time the DMB was formed.

The staff council will co-exist along with the DMB and the compatibility of roles is to be determined through negotiation over a period of time. The council is composed of representatives of clerical, custodial, and food services employees, along with teachers. No administrator, department chairman, or head teacher is a member of this group. It is too early to predict how effective the staff council will be or what kinds of problems might be experienced through unclear delineation of its functions as they interact with the functions of the DMB. However, the climate is healthy for experimentation.

One underlying theme in the formation of the staff council was the recognition of the need to provide a vehicle to increase total staff unity. We have had fewer staff meetings to deal with school-wide issues since the DMB has been operating, and this has caused staff members to feel more isolated in their departments.

One other factor, I would hypothesize, that has caused this need to surface is an in-group, out-group phenomenon which has become more apparent as the DMB has increased in its effectiveness.

Another significant change that occurred during January was the formation of a new curriculum council for the school. It was formed by the DMB because it was recognized that the DMB was spread too thinly and that there needed to be a group which could give its full attention to curricular issues. The new council is empowered to review and

analyze the total school curriculum in terms of students' needs and to make decisions regarding deletions, additions, and/or modifications of curriculum offerings. This group is composed of five teachers selected by the staff, two students selected by the student body, one counselor, and one administrator. No DMB member is a member of the group. The DMB retains no veto power over the group; my relationship with it will be through the vice principal who will be one of its members. Generally, the vice principal will be operating in a "joins" capacity in terms of Schmidt & Tannenbaum's Leadership Styles Continuum [6, pp. 95-101]. If I cannot live with a decision this group is contemplating, it will be my responsibility to declare that in advance of the time the decision is made.

We are continually seeking new and improved ways to solve the problems that confront us. Even though collective bargaining is beginning to introduce some constrains, we still have managed to maintain open relationships between teachers, students, and administrators. Undoubtedly, Organizational Development has been a very positive influence in promoting the type of school climate which allows us to hang on to this previous ingredient.